

# Asserting Native Lifestyle and Culture: A Study of Zitkala Sa's Autobiographical Writings

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## Abstract

Native American literature is a literature written with a specific purpose: to tell their side of truth. An African proverb says that all the tales will glorify the hunter till the lion learns to tell his story. This is especially true about the colonial literature. The colonial literature written by the Whites degraded and dehumanized the Natives and the Natives could not retaliate because the truth was obscured by the invaders's language. However the learning of language has empowered the Natives to tell their truth. This paper is a study of Zitkala Sa's autobiographical writings.

Key words: Zitkala Sa, Natives, Colonialism, Culture.

In the history of mankind; colonialism has probably been the most important feature. It is important not only because it changed the course of history of mankind; but because it decimated cultures, demonised and degraded human beings; committed rapacious exploitation of the Native lands. However, the most damaging impact of colonialism has been psychological. It not only thrust people with inferiority complex, but also damaged their psyches. The most destructive disease for the Natives has been "despair" (Chakvin 5). This despair emanates from the colonial policies where the Native was treated as sub-human and the descriptions often bordered on cannibalism. Consider the descriptions of Australian Aborigines in a colonial narrative:

The west Australian Aborigine stands right at the bottom of the class to which we belong. The native black has no intelligence ....He is as a general rule... brutish, faithless ... vicious ... a natural born liar and a thief. The Australian black may have a soul, but if he has then the horse and the dog are definitely the superior in every way to the black human. ( qtd. in Collingwood 115)

Similar were the description of the Native Americans.

What knowledge they have of God, or what idall they adore, we have no perfect intelligence, I think them rather Anthropophagi, or devourers of mans flesh or fish which they find dead (smell it neverso filthily) but they eat it, as they finde it without any other dressing. A loathsome thing, either, to the beholders or the nearers. (qtd. in Berhofer 16-17)

The stereotypes that were created by the invaders exist even now, though some may have altered to some extent for instance, the "uncivilized savage" is now the "drunken Indian" (Franklin 311). American society is still replated with such stereotypes.

The problem for the Natives is more complex in the 'settler' colonies where the Aboriginal people exist only as marginal minorities. These people are outnumbered in their own lands and fight everyday against oppressive structures to maintain their existence. The colonial policies of the government still continue to negate the existence of the Natives. The White centric policies ignore the culture differences and continue to oppress the Natives. Aime Cesaire wrote about colonialism:

They prove that colonization, I repeat dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it that the colonizers, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal. (41)

In the African and Asian countries which have gained freedom from the oppressive colonial regimes, the Natives have retrieved their history, culture and humanity. In case if the Natives have not retrieved their humanity, then at least they are in the process of retrieving. The master Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe calls this process “re-storying” (Home and Exile). In other words, the Natives in the newly independent countries have started building up their images and regaining their humanity. This had been made possible by the newly gained independence as the people are governed by their own people.

On the other hand, the Natives of the settler countries still live under the oppressive conditions where their stereotypical images are almost sanctioned by the governments and loved by the mainstream societies. They live in societies where “a novel written by a non-aboriginal writer sell[s] millions of copies when it is riddled with stereotypes, racial attitudes, shallow, one dimensional characters and cultural inaccuracies” (Wheeler 40). The governments in these countries abet these attitudes by indirectly supporting them. Alexis Wright, the noted Australian Aboriginal writer writes:

I do not like the way we are being treated by successive governments, or the way our histories have been smudged, distorted, hidden, or written for us. I want the truth to be told, our truths, so first and foremost, I hold my pen for the suffering in our communities. (qtd. in Heiss 12)

The Native people know that they do not have numbers to affect the outcome of the politics. That is why they have taken resort to writing. The soft power of writing has come to their rescue. Among the Natives of the United States of America, Zitkala Sa is probably the first among the Native Americans who use writing as an effective weapon to use colonial agenda of the Whites and to establish the identity of her people. Writing sometimes has magical effect on the readers. The people are unable to observe with naked eye becomes clear to them when they read. This happens with the writings of Zitkala Sa also.

The cultural differences between the Natives and the Whites are accentuated by the writings of Zitkala Sa. The people are unable to appreciate the cultural difference when they watch them. The people who look at these cultural differences have already been fed on the negative images that is why their minds can only attach negative connotations to the appearance and cultural habits of the Natives. However, reading allows them to meditate on the negative images and also permits them to have a look at the other side of the story. This allows the transformations to take place in the hearts of readers and the readers becomes “the architect of great social transformations” (Maracle 3).

In the autobiographical piece “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” she tells about an incident where she tells her mother: “Mother When I am tall as my cousin Warca-Ziwin, you shall not have to come for water. I will do it for you” (4). To this her mother replies: “If the paleface does not take away from us the river we drink” (4). This laconic reply of the mother unbares the truth about the exploitation of the Native lands and resources. The colonialism unleashed an exploitation of the natural resources that destroyed the Eden that was America. The reply of mother makes clear that the colonizers took away all the resources away from the Natives and the Aboriginal people become refugees in their own lands. In this short piece, Zitkala Sa gives the readers a peep into the displacement of her people. Her mother tells Zitkala Sa: “When I was a little girl, but we were driven, my child, driven like a herd of buffalo” (4).

The displacement of Natives by the greedy Whites is a historical truth that does not find a mention in the White histories. If at-all, it is present in the history then it is presented as a humanitarian process of saving the Natives from unscrupulous Whites. After reading Zitkala Sa’s autobiographical piece, readers may be spurred into doing a little research on displacement of the Natives. Whatever Zitkala Sa writes about displacement is supported by the independent researches:

To say that the movement was a success administratively, however, is only to say that the bodies were removed from the land wanted by the Whites. It does not say even that the bodies had to reach the lands to which they were sent. Many Indians died enroute from cold, starvation, sickness and other causes which could have been prevented had the power been as much concerned about seeing that Indians got to the land allotted them as they were in removing them from the lands desired by the Whites (Washburn 1965, 275).

Whatever Washburn concluded about the displacement of the Natives is further authenticated by the description of Zitkala Sa:

Well, it happened on the day we moved camp that your sister and uncle were both very sick. Many others were ailing, but there seemed to be no help. We travelled many days and nights; not in the grand, happy way that we moved camp when I was a little girl, but we were driven my child, driven like a herd of buffalo. With every step, your sister who was not as large as you are now, shrieked with the painful jar until she was hoarse with crying. She grew more and more feverish. Here little hands and cheeks were burning hot. (4)

This description of Zitkala Sa matches the research outcomes of Wilcomb E. Washburn. All these sources corroborates one another and proves the callousness of “the heartless paleface” (5).

In fact, the policy of dislocation still influences the writings of the Native writers. Louise Erdrich, a contemporary Native American writer of Ojibwe tribe, has also written about the policy of dislocation in her novels. Louise Erdrich also tells that when her people were displaced from great Lake region and were forced to move to alien lands” Dakota war parties, hunger, the threat of the winter’s dire weather” (79) were the constant threats. All these descriptions make clear that the policy of displacement was not “philanthropic and benevolent” (Washburn 1968, 49) as claimed by White historians and colonial narratives.

The autobiographical writings of Zitkala Sa are not only about the Callous “paleface, but also about the celebration of her culture and life style. The major difference between the White culture and the Indian culture was that while that White culture was individualistic; the Native culture was community oriented. This “communitarian-individualist difference between Indian and Euro-Western culture” is best enumerated by Native writers like Zitkala Sa writes: “The morning meal was our quiet hour, when we two were entirely alone” (5).

This shows how the Native community was communitarian where all the things belonged to the community. The concept of individual ownership was alien to the Native, but for the Whites this life style rooted in community was a sign of backwardness. The people who invaded the Native lands tried to shatter this life style and tried to thrust their ways on the Natives. Zitkala Sa writes:

I loved best the evening meal, for that was the time old legends were told. I was always glad when the sun hung low in the west, for then my mother sent me to invite the neighbouring old men and women to eat supper with us. (5)

This shows how families used to take care of one another. Zitkala Sa’s mother used to invite all the old people to her tepee for dinner. This served who purposes: First the legends were told and secondly this ensured that the old people at least got one meal. Sitting near the communal fires ensured that all the people sit together for some tim. This United them as a community and forged bonds among them. Secondly the people who were old and desperate were taken care of by the able bodied members. This was the society where there were no cousins; there were only brothers and sisters. The children were everybody’s responsibility and every member of the society took care of them. The writings of contemporary Native writers show that this tradition of taking care of the Children still exist among the Natives. Native literary writers like Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko show that the poison of individualism is the greatest problem for the contemporary world. The concept individual property increase the greed and selfishness of the individual and leads to the problems among the people. The communitarian life style is an antidote to this kind of poisonous individualism.

In this autobiographical piece, Zitkala Sa further elaborates how the Natives used to take care of one another. It was almost a perfect society where every individual used to take care of another. These values of caring for one another are transmitted to the children by elders. Zitkala Sa also learnt all these things from observing her mother. When Zitkala Sa asks her mother: “Why do you stop to cook a small meal when we are invited to a feast? (13). To this her mother replies:

My child, learn to wait. On our way to the celebration we are going to stop at Chanyu’s Wigwam. His aged mother-in-law is lying very ill, and I think she would like a taste of this small game. (13)

The elders were the role models to the youngsters in the society. For the youngsters, every moment spent in the company of elders was educative. The elders taught the youngster not only through stories and legends, but also through their own conduct. In the autobiographical pieces she tells how one elder who visited their tepee in her mother’s absence was entertained by her offerings about the coffee and appreciated her: “My granddaughter made coffee on a heap of dead ashes, and served me the moment I came” (12). This incident taught a very valuable lesson to Zitkala Sa. She understood how the appreciation ensures that Children remain in good spirits and remain inspired:

But neither she nor the warrior, whom the law of our custom had compelled to partake of my inspired hospitality, said to partake of my inspired hospitality, said anything to embarrass me. They treated my best judgement, poor as it was, with the utmost respect. It was not till long years afterward that I learned how ridiculous a thing I had done. (12)

All these unique ingredients of Native culture are on the brink of extinction. How the White policies of colonial regime led to the debilitation of this beautiful culture is also told by the writer. She tells that residential schools opened by the government to train Natives in so called civilizational values were responsible for the debilitation of Native culture. The Children were lured by the ‘palefaces’ in attending the schools. Same thing happens with Zitkala Sa is taken in; despite her mother’s warning. Her mother was old enough and had observed hypocrisy of the Whites for a long time that is why she warns her: “Don’t believe a word they say! Their words are sweet, but my child, their deeds are bitter. You will cry for me, but they will not ever soothe you” (16).

However, Zitkala Sa does not understand and is taken in by the prevarications of the White people and is taken to the Residential schools. Once in the school, she come face to face with reality. In the school she comes to know that the Whites were not as kind and considerate as they showed, rather they were ethnocentric individuals who were interested in training the Native Children into domestic helps. However, the things were not as simple as it seemed, the Native Children were brutally tortured by their ‘civilized’ caretakers. For the Whites, long hair meant unclean and shabby appearance. That is why Zitkala Sa entered the residential school; the White caretakers decided to trim her hair short, but while doing so they showed how little they knew about the cultural values associated with long hair. Zitkala Sa writes:

Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their shingled by the enemy. Among our people. Short hair were worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards! (22)

The Whites could never estimate the damage they were doing to the psyche of Native children by shingling their hair. The action of the Whites inflicted a life long “soul wound” (Vernon 35) on the children. This wound remained in their heart throughout their lives. Zitkala Sa writes about her agony:

Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People has stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward’s! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animal driven by a herder. (23)

These lines are moving enough to tell about the anguish of the children who were put in the residential schools by the Whites.

This incidence is only a tip of the iceberg for the Residential schools. In fact, when readers have a look at the recent research done into the abuses of residential schools, it seems that Zitkala Sa was lucky. The children were subjected to horrifying tortures and sexual abuses. The recent researches have indicated that the immoral White care takers of the residential schools allow the testing of medicine of the Children:

I was just eight, and they'd shipped us down from Anglican residential school, in Alert Bay to Nanaimo Indian Hospital, the one run by the United Church. They kept me isolated in a tiny room there for more than three years, like I was a lab rat, feeding me these pills, giving me shots that made me sick. Two of my cousins made a big fuss, screaming and fighting all the time, so nurses gave them shots, and they both died right away. It was done to silence them. (Hidden From History 5)

All these incidences are missing from the popular discourses; if there are any references at all then they are told from the perspectives of the Whites. That is why Native literature is very important. It tells the stories that are hidden from the eyes of the common people and humanizes the people who were considered sub-human. Residential schools were brutal institutions that tortured and oppressed the children, but they also did a favour to the Natives. They allowed the Native children to learn the language of the invaders. This learning of oppressor's language allowed Native people to present their side of the story and allowed the arrival of writers like Zitkala Sa.

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